

CONDUCTING FOCUS GROUPS

PURPOSE: To provide a fairly quick and inexpensive way to inform a group on a specific topic.

SCOPE: Provide managers with qualitative approach to pulse membership and better determine rapidly changing trends.

GENERAL: There are two types of research, quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative research is statistically valid research. This type of research is usually time consuming and can be expensive. A focus group is exploratory research, qualitative in technique. This type of research is used to describe factors that motivate behavior. A focus group is a way to investigate attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and behaviors. It is like a group interview. The primary difference is that the interviewer is really a moderator, directing the conversation down a channel outlined by a discussion guide. The moderator presents a question or an issue to the group and elicits responses from many participants. The moderator allows for an interchange among participants, but keeps the conversation centered around the items outlined on the discussion guide. Many books and articles are available on focus groups at your library or bookstore.

GUIDANCE:

Focus Groups Have the Following Qualities

- One moderator (who has limited information on the topic)
- 8-12 participants with name tags
- Tape recorder (extra batteries, tapes, and backup tape recorder are required)
- Special room table in the center of the room should be round or square (non-evaluative, non threatening)
- 90 minutes to 2 hours
- Moderator's guide (covering several questions)
- Do not include people who have current or past employment ties with the topic to be discussed

Role of the Moderator

It is the moderators' responsibility to stimulate group members to interact with each other rather than with the moderator. If individuals direct all comments to the moderator rather than one another, a focus group is not taking place. The most difficult part of being a moderator is getting out of the role of a leader (which is where respondents want you) and into the role of a facilitator. A working analogy can be borrowed from the movie. A director gets actors to do what he wants, but the actors do all the work. He has a copy of the script, and he provides the actors with settings to say their lines. With a focus panel, you have the script and the respondents have the lines in their heads (their beliefs, opinions, feelings, assumptions, etc.). You give them the cues to interact. Words of support and encouragement are given, but the moderator should not become a defendant of any one idea or concepts or an educator to the group.

Recruiting Participants

A group is brought together for a discussion because they have something in common. They may not know it, but they do! They may see themselves as ordinary individuals, but you know they are all nonusers of the clubs, retirees, single parents, enlisted, and officers. When recruiting a group, these elements should be remembered:

- Decide what target elements should be considered:
 - i.e., sex, age, race, officer, enlisted, marital status, use or non use of product or service
- Over recruit to ensure minimum number of respondents (if 8- 10 people are wanted, recruit 13)
- Give the respondents as much detail as possible (without compromising the information you wish to elicit).
- Tell respondents if they will be paid or compensated, and how long they will be in session
- Avoid vagueness. Sound positive. Tell them the purpose of the research effort.
- Give them a number to call you if they have problems or questions.
- Follow up with a confirmation memo that includes time, place, purpose, and directions.

Discussion Outline Guide

The moderator in conjunction with the activity manager writes the script for the session. This is the preferred sequence of events:

- Initial meeting with manager to find out what he knows, wants to know, and his basic assumptions
- Obtain information on the target population and explore assumptions made about the target population and their needs
- Draft a series of questions with the manager's help
- Prepare the topic outline guide. It should contain:
 - Introduction that covers purpose of the session and ground rules
 - Introduction of the moderator to the group and group members to one another
 - Non-threatening questions first to establish rapport
 - Content questions on issues to be discussed with notes to the moderator regarding cues or areas where probing may be needed. (Helpful to make notes on intent of some questions and aid in eliciting desired responses)
- Begin with generic questions then move to specific

Conducting a Focus Group

Now that you have the respondents in a closed room with the tape recorder going, what do you do next? Your goal is to obtain answers to questions and issues in an atmosphere that is spontaneous, non-evaluative, and non-threatening. Some ways to do this:

- Seat the respondents in a circle or a square to avoid "head-of-the-table" leader image
- Tables serve as barriers and may be avoided if convenient
- Introduce members to each other
- Some effective mechanics to facilitating group discussion:
- Name tags with the first names printed in block

- Include those sitting next to you in the discussion
- Provide refreshments
- Remind participants because the session is being taped, only one person can talk at a time
- A moderator walks a fine line between encouraging spontaneity of responses and letting people get "carried away" to a point where discussion is not productive. Make sure you keep the participants on track.
- Encourage shy respondents to speak by calling on them by name.
- Issues and points don't have to be covered in order as long as all the main points are covered in the allotted time.
- The best discussion usually comes in the last 15 minutes.
- Keep the tape going even as the session breaks up. People tend to say things to you that they may not say in front of others.

Preparing a Report

The following should be present in the report:

- Who is in your group (demographics).
- Copy of your discussion guide completed with any annotations you may have made.
- Copies of concepts or relevant materials shown to participants.

Reports tend to follow format:

- Introduction-purpose and methodology.
- Major topic or issue
- Summary
- Recommendations

Uses of Focus Groups

Most focus groups are conducted for at least one of the following reasons:

- New product or service
- Marketplace test for program acceptance
- Taste test
- Idea generation
- Customer service gauge

Limitations of Focus Groups

- Focus groups are nonscientific form of data collection
- Not predictable to universe of similar respondents
- Built in biases
- Sample size small by necessity
- Results cannot be quantified
- Reports are subjective analyses of opinions, beliefs, and assumptions

Why Focus Groups Are Used

Given the limitations outlined in the last section, why would anyone want to spend time and money on this kind of research?

Some major reasons for conducting focus groups include: -

- Short time lines needed for some research
- Testing ideas and concepts in the decision stage
- Testing serve as a "disaster" check when all other research is over
- Supporting other research and confirm hypotheses
- Serving as a starting point to generate hypotheses when none are know
- Security--when limited exposure of a new idea is wanted
- Allowing client observation of real consumers grappling with issues, products, concepts, services, ideas, etc.

POC

For any information or a more detailed package on how to conduct focus groups, contact Mr. Mark Blais, HQ AFSVA/SVIC, DSN 487-6312/2353.